

# Cross-cultural disgust: some problems in the analysis of contemporary horror cinema

by Chuck Kleinhans

## Part one: notes on cross-cultural disgust

### Introduction

This essay[1][[open endnotes in new window](#)] explores some key issues surrounding the status of contemporary horror films and their critical analysis. I speak tentatively rather than exhaustively and authoritatively because I am still working with the ideas, but also because I see the creative and critical field as in process, changing, and contingent. In the past two issues of *Jump Cut* (JC 49 and 50) as well as this one, we ran a group of articles on horror films.[2] The essays arrived independently but when published together showed a new sophistication and complexity in discussing the genre and its political implications. I was also aware of new critical writing on horror, books and articles, and the vogue for East Asian horror (and new Hollywood adaptations of these films to a Euro-North American market and sensibility). For the *Jump Cut* section in issue 49, I contributed an analysis of Fruit Chan's Hong Kong film *Dumplings*[3], which began with my fascination with Chan's body of work and an admiration for this particular film as a political allegory of contemporary transnational capitalism. The film involves eating dumplings made of fetuses as a rejuvenating treatment. When I finished the article, I realized that I had many notes about additional issues to deal with, such as the fetus images, abortion, cannibalism, and disgust in relation to horror, but these seemed to wander off from focusing on the film. This essay returns to those issues. Usually I try to write and like to read carefully organized and crafted essays that develop a systematic argument. That's all well and good; it helps readers understand and critique my efforts, and it forces me to clarify what I think. But I intend this piece to be different. I want it to be more exploratory.

Cross cultural analysis is important, especially in a time when many people invoke "globalization" as a slogan without thinking through the contradictions and complications of the term and the concept. Globalization, or more accurately, neo-imperialism can only be adequately understood by analyzing power, especially the power differential between those who introduce, control, and change things, and those who have to adapt to that process. Here I want to explore some of those issues in a way that hopefully can indicate the complexity involved. I also think that horror as a

moving image genre is changing (once again) and the conceptual machinery to understand it is also in flux. It is a fluid field at the moment, and I want to do some justice to that and respect it. And related, the newly developing discussion of the senses and emotions in media analysis, in my specific case here, disgust and abjection, needs space to develop.

I don't think I have all the answers, but I think I have some idea of what the key questions are that we have to ask to get to another level of analysis. So, what I'll try to do is provide a path or trail, but one which allows for sidetracks, scenic overviews, rest stops, and curious detours, and probably a few dead ends. This is a first installment in a series considering these issues.

## 1: Taste across cultures

"Cultural exchange starts with misunderstanding. We are not afraid of misunderstanding."

—Tatsumi Hijikata, founder of Butoh art[4]

An apocryphal story: A wealthy Western couple enters an Asian restaurant (somewhere in Asia, or in Chinatown, etc.) with their pet dog. Seated, they ask the waiter to feed the dog a meal in the kitchen while they dine. After dinner they want to retrieve the pet only to find out they have just eaten it.

The joke relies on the known East/West cultural difference that in some Asian cultures eating dog is accepted, while in the West it is prohibited by custom, if not law. The story can be told with slightly different spins: a communications confusion (mutual, or a translation problem by the waiter); a matter of class and cultural ignorance (and a joke on the couple); the subaltern's revenge; etc.

I've found that discussions which touch on these cultural differences are sometimes awkward between Asians and Westerners, or resolved only with humorous remarks at best and denial at worst. Typically, East Asians know that dog meat is available and consumed in some venues in China, South Korea, and the Philippines; yet they also know that this is considered disgusting by most Western people who tend to think of dogs as companion animals.[5] Yet there are Asian films which deal with the topic, such as *Dog Food* (Azucena, d. Carlos Sigüion-Reyna, Philippines, 1999) which depicts the friendship of a dog-meat vendor and a teen female dog-lover. Recently I wrote an analysis of Korean director Kim Ki-duk's *Address Unknown* (2001), which prominently features a dog butcher in its allegorical depiction of Korean society which touches on some of these issues.[6]



The dog butcher negotiates with a small town restaurant owner, c. 1970 South Korea in *Address Unknown*.

Recently my home state of Illinois passed legislation, after lobbying by horse lovers, to end the slaughter of horses for meat (for human consumption or animal feed) at the one remaining U.S. slaughterhouse that handles horses (the meat was usually shipped overseas or turned into dogfood). Yet, in France horsemeat is common, with its own specialty butcher shops. And in the 70s and 80s it was quite common to find horsemeat in some of the Latino groceries in my Northwest side Chicago neighborhood. (Not identified as such, at least to Anglos, but the fat-free flesh, bright red color, and taste was a dead give-away).



Parisian *chevaline* (horsemeat butcher shop)



I've had conversations with Asians and Asian-American immigrants who deny that dogs are eaten in their home country, while allowing it does happen in other countries. Talking about this with a colleague from Karachi, Pakistan, he said it was common lore in his city that whenever a ship from China docked in the port, dogs seemed to disappear. A web search easily turns up examples of tourists blogging about finding dog meat served in Taipei, Beijing, or Seoul, usually after a bit of a search. I've had people from those same places also tell me that indeed it is eaten in their nation of origin, often with a wry acknowledgement that knowing this shocks most Westerners. And I've also had other people from those same places declare it never happens, it is outlawed, it was a custom in the distant past, it might occur in backward rural areas but not in cities, etc.

## 2: Images: seen and unseen

One of my basic points about shocking images is that everyone draws the line differently and even in their own history changes with experience, emotional, and intellectual development. As someone who has worked my whole adult life with image material I have the capacity to be detached, for the most part, from images that would be alarming or repulsive or disgusting to many others. That I can accept, but there is a second effect which is judging in my own writing about these issues with how much to show, knowing that some actual or potential readers will simply not want to see these images.

Intellectually, I would argue that you couldn't understand an image unless you see it. A prose description does not suffice. But this article contains three sets of images that I know many would find very disturbing. The first is a set of three Internet images of a Chinese woman killing a kitten with her high heel shoes. The first two images set up the scene: attractive young woman holding a kitten. The third one shows the spike of a heel crushing the animal's head, face on. The very first image was published in some Western newspapers. Obviously editors found one innocuous image enough to accompany the story. (Typically, newspaper editors self-censor on the basis that their paper may be brought into the home or school and thus readily seen by children.) The third image, crushing the skull, was found on the Internet where editorial standards are relaxed to nearly non-existent. The second set of images covers the rape/murder of a waitress in the Hong Kong horror film, *The Untold Story*, and the third set depicts the murder of a family: parents and children in the same film.

One way of thinking of this is to use conventional and commonplace categories to ask if an image is "gratuitous" or "justified." Gratuitous images presumably don't need to be there; they go beyond what is needed to tell the story, dramatize the scene, explain what is happening. Yet behind that commonsense assumption is the idea that action and character are more important than spectacle, showing. It's the old Aristotelian aesthetics. Similarly, to argue from the idea that an image is "justified" by the topic or the author's intent, is to assume that there is a good reason, and that usually means a "higher" reason for an image: one justified as "art," or "historical importance," or "educational purpose," or some such explanation.

In writing my article on *Dumplings*, I was quite sure that the explicit images of abortion and cutting up dead fetuses for food were necessary: the film's social/political statement, its allegory, justified the means. In discussing the rape/murder and the murder of children in *The Untold Story* (detailed later in this essay) I also thought that

the images I chose were necessary to have a clear understanding of the film's tenor. I chose not to include what I consider even more disgusting shots that appear in the film because while they pass by very quickly in the film (that is they are clearly readable, but immediately superceded), as framegrabs online, they linger and the image becomes more disturbing when one can view it in isolation and at length. But I also know that what I have shown here is too much for some readers. I want to respect that, since this essay explores that very question of the relativity of disgust. So, I'll revert to the now-commonplace label used on unrated DVDs in the U.S. as well as in broadcast and cable television: "Viewer Discretion Is Advised," or "May Not Be Suitable For Younger or More Sensitive Viewers." You'll have to open the images in a separate window with an extra mouse click.

On the Internet we can witness Western attitudes to Asian treatment of domestic animals: for example, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) shows a clandestine video that claims to document a Chinese dog and cat fur market.[7] And Beijing has a wild animal park which includes live feeding: visitors can purchase a chicken to toss to the lions. In 2006 Chinese authorities were reported as intensively investigating an Internet video that purported to show a young woman crushing a kitten to death with her high heel shoes.[8]

### Internet-circulated images of Chinese kitten killer





[\[Click here to view final image of killing kitten\]](#)

For exotic eccentricity, the (London) *Times* carries a story, “China’s penis restaurant,” on an upscale Beijing place that offers the male organ (yak, water buffalo, goat, dog, bull) as well as more mundane terrapin leg and chicken feet.[9] While these examples play into Western Orientalist beliefs about cruelty and exoticism in East Asia, it also reveals a more fundamental knowledge that cultures in fact do draw boundaries differently, including in behavior and cuisine.

This is a kind of practical knowledge that one finds within modern mixed societies without reading anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss on the raw and the cooked or Mary Douglas on purity and pollution. In my upbringing within the clan, on the German side blood sausage and on the Swedish side lutefisk[10] provoked amused discussions especially in front of the children. As an adult, some seafood I’ve been offered (e.g., sea cucumber), and some organ meats (brains) seemed beyond my own comfort zone.[11] In Sandinista Nicaragua, stopping at a roadside restaurant, my host asked what meat was on the menu for the mid-day meal, and was told that only cow’s udder was available. He shook his head, seeing this as sad evidence of the effect of the U.S. embargo and U.S. sponsored Contra war on ordinary life. We had rice, beans, and tortillas instead.

In English, the term *disgust* stems from the sense of taste which is tied up with food and orality. As such it easily links to the experience of horror via the emotion of fear. This is perhaps most easily demonstrated with the example of the U.S. primetime TV show *Fear Factor* (2001-2006), which challenged contestants to accomplish various physical stunts such as bungee jumping and experiencing various creepy things (in a box with spiders, etc.). One of the favorite events on this show (which had a very high rating among children) had contestants eat something disgusting. A list of the “grossest stunts” on *Fear Factor* emphasizes those that involve ingestion and includes: a “pizza” of cow bile, coagulated blood paste, rancid cheese, topped with worms and fish eyes; buffalo testicles; large live spiders; cow eyeballs; horse rectum; worms; slugs. Such gross stunts are often the subject for jokes, as in the cable channel *E!*’s snarky TV clips show, *The Soup*, which recently highlighted an episode of the reality show *Man vs. Wild* which shows the host, wildlife adventurer “Bear” Grylls, manually searching through wild bear scat and demonstrating that large pieces of undigested food in the waste can be washed off and then eaten. On the face of it, it seems everyone

would agree this was disgusting. Except that obviously Grylls himself thinks it is acceptable behavior, seemingly offering the rationale that if you were lost and starving in the wilderness you could search ursine poop for edible sustenance. Survival wisdom becomes the excuse for bizarre and revolting behavior.

Celebrity chef/writer Anthony Bourdain has sampled cuisines around the world on his cable TV shows *A Cook's Tour* (Food Network) and *No Reservations* (The Travel Channel). While presenting himself as a Romantic hero adventurer, Bourdain tempers the imperial visitor to the exotic Other theme by self-mocking his persona and genuinely appreciating his hosts in their own terms. In one episode he meets tribal people in Namibia and goes on a hunt that ends in eating warthog rectum. Always the adventurer, Bourdain tries it, but reports it was very repulsive. At the same time, he clearly respects the local hunters as valiantly pursuing self-sufficiency in the face of an incredibly hard life.

The point being that the cultural difference always exists along a line of power differential. That cannot be erased, even by “going native;” however recognizing power difference as present prevents obscuring the implications. Of course the difference can be held up for ridicule or dismissal of the Other rather than just a fact of cultural variety. Specific examples always have to be assessed along an axis ranging from cultural relativism to cultural elitism and racism. While food anthropologists might be considered the most progressive in this regard, food journalists can manage the issue as well. Andrew Zimmern, host of *Bizarre Foods* (Travel Channel) eats his way around the globe highlighting the most unusual local dishes (such as worms and insects) which he enthusiastically consumes on camera. The emphasis is on his delight at finding curious cuisine and consuming it with gusto, rather than the “yuck” of *Fear Factor*.<sup>[12]</sup> But beyond the novelty of new cuisine, and educating one’s palate, lies a web of ethics and ideology. Taste isn’t simply in the mouth, it’s in the mind.

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### 3: Terms and conditions

First of all, we need to set the terms. While “disgust” is usable and familiar, a more complex discussion has followed the psychoanalytically influenced term “abjection,” particularly in the wake of Julia Kristeva’s elaboration of the term in her analysis of horror. (I’ll return to these issues later.) But, noting that “disgust” is bound to the contingency of specific cultural settings (for example the term itself is not universally translated even in Indo-European languages), it may be useful to elaborate the concept outward to include relations to “distress,” “anxiety,” “fear,” loathing,” or other terms that express a disturbance that the text or media element at hand creates in a reader/spectator/audience. This is the familiar terrain in film studies of “body genres”—genres that evoke psychological/physical responses—such as melodrama (tears), low comedy (laughter), pornography (sexual excitement).

But, to start and plant a flag, disgust is a fact, something observable. Some parts of some media texts evoke or provoke a distaste, disturbance, or other kind of rejection by the audience. Artists know this and can employ it to artistic effect. But it is also readily seen that this response varies by individuals. Not everyone is repulsed in the same way or to the same extent by the same stimulus. So, we surmise that individual psychology and perhaps experience have something to do with it.

In terms of film, which is my main reference point here, we’ve all had the experience of ourselves being with others who found certain films or parts of them revolting, annoying, or obnoxious. Common conversations about the recent cinema often include mentions of this. A doesn’t like explicit violence, while B doesn’t seem to be bothered by it. C objects to a specific example in a specific film, but doesn’t share an aversion to a very similar sequence in another film. Are these just idiosyncratic variations? Part of the normal range of differences in art reception? Or is there something deeper going on? I think it needs more investigation, and I’d move from the microlevel of individual reaction to a much broader cultural scope and try to think about another observable phenomenon: horrible or disgusting images and narrative materials vary significantly by culture and tradition. Clearly, while “disgust” as an emotion may be universal in humankind, that is all humans have aversion reactions which are both physical and mental, what provokes disgust varies from culture to culture. It seems to be taught or developed by parents with infants and children, and within cultures it seems to be distinct by class, certainly, and it seems to be inflected by gender and other social variables. In a later episode of



this article, I will propose a model for applying Bourdieu's analysis of cultural taste or distinction in terms of cross cultural disgust. Here I mark out a tripartite analysis of disgust in response to media art: individual, cultural, and "universal."

Everyone has a distinct individual response based in their own personal psychology, experience, development, and exposure to the world. This response is fundamentally visceral, a bodily experience which combines perception, cognition, and emotion: in short, personality. But it is also historical and social in the broad sense of being informed by active and intellectual activity, including one's own morality and ethical standards. The cultural, historical, and eventful framework comes into play. This is the realm of sociologically and ideologically informed response, and everyone is subject to it. In this arena, "disgust" is a learned behavior following a culturally specific (and thus also culturally variable) response. Disgust is rooted in the body: first learned as a physical repulsion. But with the development of the body and the mind, disgust can also be provoked by images and experienced as emotional or even intellectual repulsion.

## 4: Abortion and cannibalism

Before writing my article on *Dumplings*, a film that includes abortion and cannibalism, Fruit Chan's films fascinated me. I appreciated their neo-realist style, combination of class and gender depictions, and dynamic narrative patterns. I had not seen *Dumplings* but while planning to teach a course on Hong Kong cinema, a grad student in my department, Evans Chan, brought me a copy from Hong Kong and urged me to show it as an example of contemporary horror. Actually, I chose to show a clip from the beginning of *The Untold Story* (aka *Human Pork Buns*) to illustrate Hong Kong Horror, and the entire feature indie film *Fu Bo*, which contains macabre material (discussed below). To represent Fruit Chan, I screened *Durian Durian* (2004), arguably his best film (with *Little Cheung* a close second).[13][[open endnotes in new window](#)]

Viewing *Dumplings* for the first time, I realized I really couldn't easily teach it in a U.S. undergraduate classroom without extensive preparation. Some of the imagery and story elements were so disturbing that it would be better for the overall course design to simply make it available for optional viewing and to choose a less controversial film for classroom screening. However, not unexpectedly, a few students found *Fu Bo* disturbing with its theme and imagery of dead bodies in a mortuary.

The key reason why I decided against using *Dumplings* in the classroom was the anti-abortion movement's success at dominating the visual discourse of fetal images.[14] Since the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 which legalized first trimester abortion, abortion foes have used images of aborted fetuses in advertising and public demonstrations promoting their political agenda.[15] These have included large poster-sized images of bloody fetuses, purported fetuses, and "blood" covered baby dolls and animal fetuses.[16] The

controversy surrounding the 2009 honoring of President Barack Obama at Notre Dame University's commencement re-ignited the activists and brought out the same visuals. For several days before the event a plane flew over the campus with a banner trailing behind showing a bloody fetal image, and protestors gathered off campus with the usual signs, baby dolls stained with red, etc.

With a complete awareness of the knee-jerk response of anti-abortion forces, a graduating Yale senior in 2008 said she intended to show an artwork in the graduating art student gallery show that was marked by the blood stains of a series of self-induced abortions. This produced the predictable outrage, scrambling by Yale administrators, and so forth, indicating if nothing else that the student, Aliza Shvarts, had a full understanding of the dynamics of the current art world and the ability to get attention and publicity by proposing something sensational.[17]

Abortion rights activists do not have a comparable set of dramatic images in the public arena. At best their literature offers "family planning" publicity images (depicting a heterosexual two generation nuclear family with a boy and girl) or college aged straight couples in affectionate poses implying birth control for the sexually active. Commercial contraception advertising follows the same general path. In the U.S. a dispassionate or clinical visual representation of abortion is simply not allowed in the public sphere.

The one allowable depiction of abortion from a "woman's right to choose" position is the tragic frame. A powerful protest sculpture from the era before legal abortion, Edward Kienholz's *The Illegal Operation* (1962) is a mixed media piece.



Gathered around a small tan knit rug, in shades of brown/yellow/ochre a metal luggage (or part of a supermarket shopping) trolley cart is outfitted with a chair, which is then covered in stained rag cloth and a torn pillow. Working in the artist's typical assemblage of junkyard items, the piece includes a worn and dirty hospital bedpan with unidentifiable detritus in the well, a white enameled kitchen saucepan, a standard metal bucket with bloody rags and a heavily rust red stained interior, and a floor reading lamp with the yellowed fabric shade placed askew allowing a harsh bare light bulb to dramatize the little scene. A low light brown wooden stool straddles the rug and the gallery space.

The empty setting implies human agents: the woman getting an abortion and the person performing the procedure: now absent, but not forgotten by any means.[18] The sculpture thus evokes the drama of the absent event, the forbidden performance, the indignity of its space. *The Illegal Operation* is deliberately confrontational and appalling. By underlining the unsafe, unsanitary and makeshift nature of “back alley abortions,” as they were called then, the installation eloquently cries out at the injustice of then-current law. [19]

## *If These Walls Could Talk –1952*

In a similar vein, the three part episodic film *If These Walls Could Talk* (HBO,



1996) dramatizes key issues in the abortion rights movement: “1952” depicts Demi Moore as a recently widowed nurse who is forced into an illegal abortion and who dies as a result. The story boldly argues for safe, available, and medically supervised procedures. “1974” presents Sissy Spacek as a mother of four who finds herself unexpectedly pregnant and must decide between giving birth or aborting. “1996” offers Anne Heche as an unmarried student who wants to terminate her pregnancy and is counseled by Cher, playing an MD and clinic supervisor who must offer compassionate concern for her patients while fending off disruptive anti-abortion protesters at her clinic.[20]

The 1952 episode melodramatizes the story of a nurse whose husband died six months earlier in the Korean War. In a moment of despair and grief at her widowhood, she had sex with her brother-in-law and became pregnant. Even though she has professional contacts and a job in medicine, she has no access to a safe and affordable abortion. Frustrated at every turn, she even attempts to self-abort with a knitting needle into the uterus, but without success. In desperation, she finally connects with a shady and cruel figure who performs a kitchen table operation without sanitary precautions and who leaves her to bleed out and die when things go wrong. Moore plays the character’s anxiety and despair with dramatic intensity and effect. (She co-produced the project as well.) As a didactic melodrama on a social problem, the short film makes its point: without legal, safe, affordable abortion, desperate women risked their dignity and lives to solve their problem pregnancy. But this drama and its final scene is the representational limit of showing abortion in the U.S.. Against the scare and horror imagery used by anti-abortion forces, the pro-abortion side can only present abortion as a tragedy with a sympathetic victimized woman, and the mother’s blood but not a fetus.



Claire Donnelly (Demi Moore) tries to self-induce an abortion using a knitting needle in her bathroom.



Camera moves in



She collapses as her sister-in-law arrives at the house, forcing Claire to confess her pregnancy. The sister-in-law is pitiless and angry.



With no safe, affordable, or legal options, her desperation increasing, Claire contacts a shady underground abortionist. He arrives at her house, declines to wash up before the procedure and places his instruments on the kitchen table. Claire asks if he isn't going to disinfect them and he snarls that he'll just leave. She acquiesces. The abortion begins on her kitchen table.



Claire winces and cries out during the procedure.



Done, the abortionist hastily leaves while the camera pulls back showing Claire on the table.



Severely hemorrhaging, Claire phones the hospital for help



But she collapses before being able to give her name and address.

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### *Spacked Out*

In a stark contrast, the Hong Kong alienated youth film *Spacked Out* (d. Lawrence Ah Mon , 2000) treats abortion with a direct frankness. Shot in a casual neorealist style, four mildly delinquent young teen schoolgirls (with absent or inattentive parents) hang out and pal around. Their behavior ranges from shoplifting cosmetics and skipping school to hanging out in malls, having casual sex, and doing drugs. They make a little money by smuggling mobile phones across the border to the Mainland, posing for softcore pin-ups, and engaging in phone sex (during history class). The narrative center is Cookie, 13, who is pregnant from her first experience with a boy (who told her you can't get pregnant the first time, so there was no need for contraception). Abortions are easy to get in the city, her 16-year-old friend Banana says, apparently from experience. Her mother has run off and only phones her occasionally; her best girlfriend is now in reform school. With the other girls, she goes from her hometown, Tuen Mun, a new high rise development in the Hong Kong New Territories, to Mong Kok, in central Hong Kong, hoping to find her boyfriend. When she does, predictably he's not interested in her.

Along for the adventures are Banana and Bean Curd, a butch dyke, and her femme girlfriend, Sissy. After doing heavy drugs, Sissy flaunts the overprotective Bean Curd and decides to run off with a boy. In anger, Bean Curd starts cutting herself and the trio end up at a clinic to patch up the cutter. Cookie uses the occasion to get an abortion. The sequence has a dream/nightmare aspect to it, including fantasy-coded music track, with flashforwards and flashbacks. As Cookie wanders around the office suite, grotesque objects appear, as well as peculiar items such as a peddle driven sewing machine in one room that seems to be used for making doll clothing, and inserted shots. The scene culminates in the abortion procedure which includes the female doctor as a grotesque and a foot operated vacuum pump which ends with a close up of a glass jar receiving the bloody extraction. Fade to black and then the waiting room where a nurse presents Cookie with a specimen container with the fetus.





The gal pals join a friend who supplies hard drugs. L-R: Banana, the dealer, Sissy, Cookie, and Bean Curd. They begin to make bongos for a party, but Cookie remains withdrawn, having just been dumped by the guy who got her pregnant.

Joined by boys, the party is underway when Cookie sees several baby dolls in a refrigerator, a symbolic vision of her own unwanted pregnancy.



Wandering in the clinic before her abortion procedure, Cookie sees inexplicable two plastic legs on an exam table: artificial limbs? mannequin parts?



Cookie continues her dream-like exploration of the clinic.



She sees the female MD at her desk eating Mo Yan Ka Sai, a rice pudding with red beans on a stick. A reverse shot close-up makes the action especially grotesque.



A back room contains an old fashioned treadle sewing machine and tiny doll clothing.

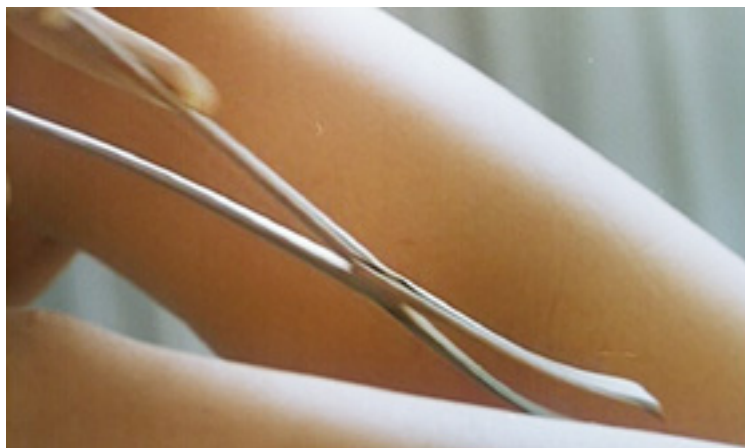




A flashforward shows Cookie and girlfriends on a bus after the abortion (indicating the procedure was done, without complications). A layered image shows the many neon signs of Kowloon (present) and the MD's medical instruments (flashback).



From Cookie's POV in the stirrups of the exam table, she imagines the MD laughing maniacally. The soundtrack complements this strange subjective imagining of the procedure. [The shot is a non-diegetic insert in the sense that it isn't "really" happening, but it is, within the sequence, much like scary shots in Hong Kong ghost and horror films, as if Cookie's re-imagining of the transpired event is shaped within other popular culture images.]



The abortion procedure begins.



The MD pumps a foot pedal for vacuum extraction. In Cookie's imagination she sees feet actively operating the treadle sewing machine



We see blood flowing in the vacuum tube, and then an active splatter of blood across Cookie on the table. Later we understand that this was a fantasy shot, not an actual event, as with many



A shock cut ends the abortion procedure sequence with a close up of a vacuum jar and the arrival of the extracted fetus to the container. Fade to



other shots in the clinic.

black.



Recovering in the waiting room, the nurse gives Cookie a specimen container with the extracted fetus.



Back home, Cookie goes up a hillside and buries the fetus along with one of her earrings and a small doll. She speaks to her ex-boyfriend, saying their child is dead, and that she's learned boyfriends are not important, your friends are everything. Without the traditional Buddhist incense burned to the dead (the smoke rising to Heaven), she lights a cigarette and places it on the small dirt mound.



At the intersection of childhood (the doll), teen style (the earring), and womanhood (the fetus), Cookie is a tiny figure in the grand landscape of a New Territories town as she plaintively asks when and if the mother who abandoned her will ever contact her.

What seems most remarkable about the sequence from a U.S. perspective is precisely its frank realism (though framed with dream or surreal elements). Free of a moralizing discourse, the abortion is presented as “matter of fact” rather than as “this is a terrible thing.” It does, along with the next sequence, of burial, evoke pathos, largely around this child-woman on the cusp of change. Cookie deserves better, but anyone deserves better or everyone deserves better.

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### *The Untold Story*

Often cited as an example of excessive violence or the type of low-grade film produced under Hong Kong's Category III (most restricted due to sex and/or violence), *The Untold Story* (d. Danny Lee [Li Hsiu Hsien], 1993) deserves re-evaluation. Clearly commercial in origin and intent, the film (based on an actual case from the mid-1980s) begins with a group of fairly comic and inept cops investigating human remains that washed up on a beach and a missing family that ran a restaurant. The restaurant's current operator appears first in flashback fleeing Hong Kong for Macau after committing murder in a gambling quarrel. Answering police questions, Wong (Herman Yau) claims he bought the restaurant (and offers the cops pork buns). The bumbling police finally figure out that he did something to the previous owners, and beat it out of him during interrogations. As the cops become increasingly angry and appalled, and once aware of what was in the "pork buns" they scarfed down, their own violence escalates. The killer's confession is told in graphic flashback, with especially horrifying murder of the children and grinding the bodies up for pork buns. The shift in register from an initial comic tone with buffoon cops to an increasing violence, viciousness, and graphic derangement and police themselves going out of control, challenges the audience to move from laughing at the film (both the police and the barbequed "pork" situation) to stomach-churning discomfort.

In addition to raising issues of disgust in terms of (unsuspected) cannibalism, *The Untold Story* raises questions of disgust through its use of extreme graphic violence. In trying to specify Category 3 films, a new classification allowing a wider latitude to sex and violence for adult audiences which appeared in Hong Kong shortly after the Tienanmen events, Julian Stringer argues that the Category 3 films often allegorize deep class divisions in Hong Kong in the 1990s.[21][\[open notes in new window\]](#) With the pending Hong Kong handover to the PRC in 1997 and the repression of Tienanmen in mind, the most privileged sector sought dual citizenship, or moved abroad permanently, or sent their kids to school abroad hoping to establish the basis for foreign citizenship. However the vast mass of Hong Kong people had no such option. Stringer argues that many Category 3 films expressed the political and social anxieties of those who couldn't leave. The films played in cheaper, more run-down theaters (in contrast to a new set of multiplexes playing many glossy U.S. and pan-Asian films). Stringer's general point is doubtless valid.[22]

There is always a problem in dealing with films that exploit sex and/or violence, or sex and violence (and other taboos such as drug use). For some people, especially censors and gatekeepers, the mere presence of certain images marks them as unworthy. But the defensive response often acknowledges the existence of offensive material and to then argue for a higher purpose: artistic, moral, political, etc.[23] The point I want to make here is that while close textual analysis is valuable and essential, the question of disgust, often phrased in terms of depictions being "excessive" or "gratuitous," cannot be settled in terms of the text itself. To argue only the text, can only end with each (or every) side

asserting *their* interpretation is the best. It becomes a King of the Hill battle. Rather, as I indicated earlier in this article, there is a range of audience response to the text, and we have to understand that variation. Where people “draw the line” varies. That is, to use a conventional phrasing from contemporary film theory, meaning is a constructed relation between a text and viewer/audience. And that viewer exists socially, with variation.

Tony Williams, who frequently writes on horror films, follows Stringer in offering a social analysis of *The Untold Story*.<sup>[24]</sup> “Despite its graphic violence, *The Untold Story* is not to be dismissed as a sleazy, gratuitous production. It also deals with real-life social issues involving violence and exploitation in Hong Kong society.”<sup>(209)</sup> Yet the argument here is slippery. True, the film depicts violence and exploitation, but does it really examine it in any way that allows for a greater understanding? And if so, of what? As opposed to a naturalistic depiction of the environment, which at least recognizes the material form of social relations as shaping character behavior, *The Untold Story* tells us very little about Hong Kong (or more accurately Macau which is where the main action is set after the initial pre-title violence).<sup>[25]</sup>

Williams puts aside the sexual violence of the rape and murder of the waitress. In contrast to Williams, I would argue that Wong is shown as cheating at gambling, quick to anger and rage, and in no way remorseful. When he himself is victimized by police interrogation and by other prisoners, he tries to kill himself by biting his wrists—ironically a kind of self-cannibalism. After medical torture by police and medical staff, he finally does kill himself, slashing his wrists. He is never sympathetic and in fact he kills two of the most sympathetic characters—the restaurant cook and the waitress—in brutal ways (and they, of course, are true proletarians), and an entire family: parents, grandmother, and five young children.

William’s reading of the film as a social-political statement critical of the authorities and showing the desperate situation of those at the bottom of the social/economic ladder tends to special pleading. Yes, the authorities will do anything including physical and medical torture. But there is nothing redeeming about Wong, while his victims are shown dying horrible deaths that they don’t “deserve.” For Williams, the social message compensates for the violence. He reads Category 3 as showing “tragedy and farce,” while I would tend to assign it to melodramatic excess, the grotesque, and farce. The rape/murder sequence, for example, does aim to frighten the audience by showing something so extreme that there is no possible excuse for the character’s behavior. Similarly, after killing the family in the restaurant, Wong goes out of his way to get the grandmother and bring her to the scene of dead bodies so he can murder her too. He tells the police that she was a perennial “busybody” who came over to the restaurant simply to get a free meal. In this barrage of angry violence, there is a depiction of violence begetting violence, but no resting point.



In the pre-title scene, following a gambling quarrel, Wong Chi Hang (Anthony



Wong) beats up, sets afire his opponent, and flees Hong Kong for Macau. While filled with violent action, the sequence is less disgusting than later murders.



Shifting to Macau, Wong is now running a restaurant. We first see him cutting up a pig and eviscerating its organs.



Rack focus shot. In the foreground the waitress wipes her hands on her apron, inadvertently showing her thigh. The focus shifts to the background where we see Wong, huge meat cleaver in hand, chopping up the pig parts, foreshadowing the later sexual violence.



The waitress sees him peering and straightens her skirt. Reaction shot: close up of the cleaver cutting the pig's thigh/ham.



Meanwhile, the cops are endlessly goofing around. The Lieutenant has a new hooker on his arm every time he appears which the guys ogle. The butch-dressed female of the squad (right) mocks their behavior.

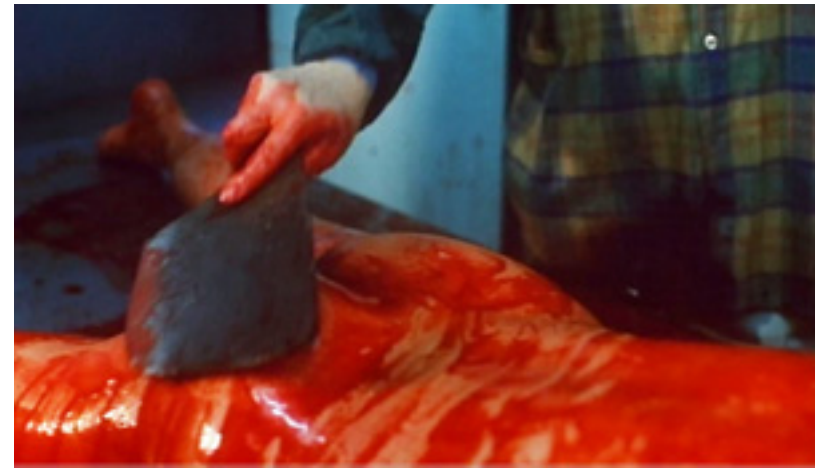


When a new employee gets suspicious and spots the boss cheating at gambling, Wong kills him in a dark room at night. The details of the fight are obscured but the sequence includes fairly conventional horror suspense: the body is dead, but when Wong tries to get away, the victim's death grip holds onto his leg and the cleaver must be used to chop off the hand. Wong begins

cutting up the body on a kitchen table, below the frame. Opening the torso he lifts the guts and puts them in a soup pot and continues the bloody process.



Turning the body over, we finally get a close look at the face. The bill spindle Wong initially used to blind the victim is still in the eye socket. This kind of grotesque detail close up follows conventional horror shock effects.



Changing to comic grotesque, a shot shows the bloody lower torso and the meat cleaver caressing the buttocks. The camera pans up as Wong begins to slice the rump.



Details of the food preparation/corpse disposal end with a straight cut to fresh steamed buns.



Back at the police station, the guys ogle another woman, not realizing it is the squad's female in a sexy sheath dress.



Sent to investigate at the restaurant, the cops accept some fresh barbequed meat buns from Wong.   
This is really delicious.





Back at the station with Wong's gift of fresh buns, the whole group dives in.



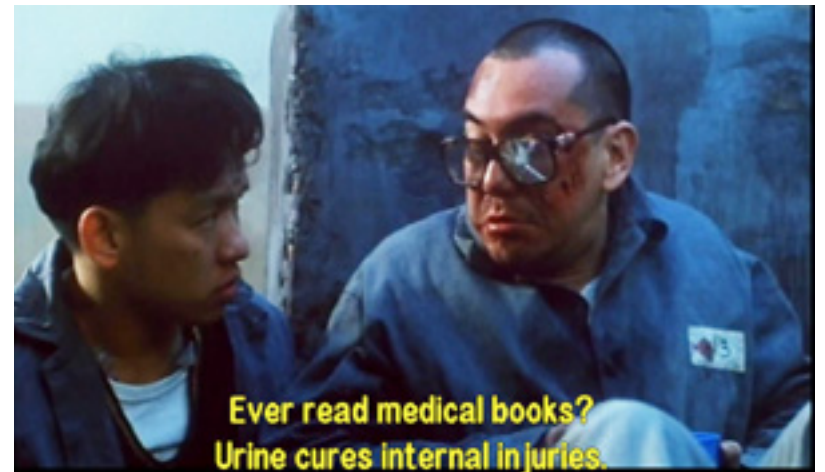
Everyone relishes the tasty treat. Only the Lieutenant declines, "I never eat barbeque pork buns. You never know what's in the filling."

[[Click here to see next sequence of images: attack, rape, murder of the waitress.](#) Captions follow here below.]

- Following this comic interlude, back at the restaurant, realizing the waitress is suspicious, Wong attacks her after closing up. He hits her, rips her clothing off, and ties her up. This begins the most explicitly brutal attack so far.
- Wong mauls the waitress and brutally rapes her. There are close-ups of her distressed face and his demented anger.
- After the sex act, he grabs a bunch of chop sticks and in this shot from under the table, swings them into her body.
- The murderous assault continues with his thrusting and her agony. There is an obvious visual parallel of facial and body expression between the depicted physical assault and the expressions of intense feeling during sexual intercourse. But it remains a painful parallel, not a crossing over of boundaries. Remarkably, actor Anthony Wong, always manages to express his character's inner rage; he was awarded best actor for 1993 at the Hong Kong Film awards.
- The camera returns to a shot from under the table; Wong removes the chopsticks and there is a gush of blood. Cut to above: bloody chopsticks fall on floor, ending the sequence.



Wong is captured trying to leave Macau. The police swarm him, subdue him, he is held against a wall and gut-punched by the Lieutenant in front of a crowd, then taken behind a screen and worked over by other cops. Finally, back at the police station, the squad beats him severely. Moved into a hall with reporters, he yells about police brutality



Prevented from further trying to beat a confession out of him, the police outsource the job to prisoners (including the murdered restaurant owner's brother who is in jail). The disgusting material escalates. Wong's head is pushed into a dirty toilet, he's punched until he begins to piss blood, and appealing to another prisoner, he drinks that guy's urine, saying



it cures internal bleeding. Finally he bites his wrists in a suicide attempt.



Taken to a hospital to recover, the police devise a new torture plan with the doctor. Wong is kept hyper stimulated on drugs for three days and sleep deprived. Finally in near-delirium, he confesses. In flashback, we see the murder of the restaurant owner and his family.

[[Click here to see next sequence of images: murder of restaurant owner's family.](#)  
Captions follow here below.]

- The parents have to witness Wong cut their son's throat. They are then killed in front of the children who are one by one destroyed.
- There are repeated close-up shots of the terrorized children's faces as they are about to be murdered with the meat cleaver.

The escalation of violence, by the murderer and then by the investigating police, is a theme and defines the rhythmic trajectory of the narrative. My visual analysis here stresses key moments, but a much more fine and close analysis of acting, shot composition, lighting, and editing is possible. Overall, the film balances between cheap exploitation and serious statement. Or in other words, it shows a plurality of themes, moments, actions, and affects. It can, then, be read either way or as an amalgam of both. Undeniably, it is commercially effective, with the genre's requisite suspense and horror, excellent performance and cinematography, and effective sound and music tracks.

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### 5: Politics across cultures

What I've tried to do here in considering three different films is present a starting point for a better analysis of disgust across cultures. I've argued that because of anti-abortion organizing and political controversy in the U.S., the possible range of what can be shown in depictions of abortion is very narrow. Thus, one of the very few depictions of abortion procedure, *If These Walls Could Talk: 1952*, can only show a "tragic" outcome to abortion procedure and not use a fetus image at all.[26][[open endnotes in new window](#)] In contrast, the Hong Kong youth-themed film, *Spacked Out*, uses remarkably graphic details in showing the procedure and the result (highlighted by surreal style). The film's attitude to the procedure is casual, frank, and without regret. The comparison reveals a different social and political groundwork in the two cultures of origin which in turn informs the creative product and respective audience understanding.

To return to my original starting point, *Dumplings*. My analysis of that film clearly spells out the serious allegory and social critique at the heart of Fruit Chan's film. But I understand that someone could still object to the film's visual depiction of making dumplings from fetuses and the process of abortion. Everyone has to draw the line somewhere to be human. At the same time, the film does rise above its tabloid news origins (as does *The Untold Story*, I'd say). While he hasn't discussed it in interviews, the likely source of Fruit Chan's film was an urban legend from the mid-1990s. An article appeared in the Hong Kong English language tabloid publication *Eastern Express*, "Aborted Babies Sold as Health Food for \$10." [27] It raised the blood libel charge (that another nation or subculture kidnaps, slaughters, and eats children). In the article, author Bruce Gilley claims hearsay knowledge and "rumours" that in Shenshen China, aborted fetuses were routinely turned into rejuvenation food. Quotes from claimed interviewees (with extremely common names and no further identification) report the abortion leftovers are commonly available. A response article by Poppy Dixon describes how the original fiction was picked up by right wing fundamentalist Christians in the summer of 1995 to denounce U.S. participation in the UN Conference on Women in Beijing.[28] The following year the fringe right and anti-abortion forces amplified the story, and eventually far right members of the U.S. Congress entered remarks about it in the Congressional Record as part of their denunciations of China. Fruit Chan spun this slanderous propaganda story into a specific dramatic fiction which brought out a very different social-political analysis for a very different end.

Turning to murderous violence and cannibalism, *The Untold Story* presents two different kinds of revulsion. First, the eating of human flesh, which is largely treated as a joke and which results (once discovered) in gastric distress for the cops. Second, the extreme violence of rape and murder by Wong and torture by the police for confession shows that violence itself escalates violence and it is emotionally horrifying and morally repulsive. Explaining the film for a Western readership, Julian Stringer and Tony Williams provide a plausible grounding for justifying the film's violence by arguing it dramatizes the social-political situation of its intended primary audience: the working class and dispossessed of Hong Kong. This critical context waives concerns about violent depictions.

As a working distinction: cheap exploitation presents something shocking primarily for its shock effect, rather than for a larger narrative or aesthetic purpose. The shock exists primarily for just that moment, for that audience reaction of stomach-turning surprise. This is the sense of gore film or splatter cinema at its most basic, the sort of thing which often brings mention of Herschell Gordon Lewis's exploitation film, *Blood Feast* (1963) as the start of a horror film trend.



*Blood Feast's* thrifty effects: lots of red paint and butcher shop offal.

It is in the same league as *Fear Factor's* “yuck”: something presented for a specific and predictable response (for the overwhelming majority of the audience) and no more. Shock for shock's sake; or in the ironic version, for a laugh. There is no move to a more serious level, such as raising ethical issues, or extending character development for a greater narrative purpose.

Because of this considerable violence or graphic sexuality is often called “gratuitous” or “excessive.” It goes beyond what is strictly needed for plot or character, it is, in short, part of spectacle. But, of course, so are the action film, or most musicals, etc. Because there has been a significant shift in aesthetic analysis of film, particularly popular genre film, by the recent reconsideration of the nature and aesthetics of spectacle, we have to stop and think through the all too easy dismissal of cinematic excess, especially when



sex and violence are involved.

To return to my earlier tripartite model. Anyone and everyone will have a response that is partly “universal” that is based in human nature, in the biological evolution of the species. It is physical and embodied: for disgust, it is the aversion reaction. Given certain physical stimuli, humans will gag and reject. But this extends beyond the mechanics of the body to a repulsion that is grounded in a cultural level of being. It is historical, cultural, learned, in short: sociological and ideological. And it is also individual, formed within the idiolect of personal response. At this level, it is visceral and bodily in its expression, but also embodied in one’s emotions and memory, and also informed by one’s moral and ethical framework.

An example. When Wong confesses under medical duress that he disposed of the bodies by making “pork buns” the police gather around him begin to choke and then vomit with the realization that they ate them. Even though the dumpling consumption took place many days earlier, the fact of it having happened brings on a visceral response. Cognition of what happened stimulates a new revulsion expressed with the body and relying on emotional processing within a cultural/ideological framework. The moment is comic, and the audience can laugh because they are not directly implicated in the joke. However the rape/murder and child murders short-circuit any “distancing”—ironic, generic, or aesthetic. Audience response is much closer to our reaction as if the depicted scene were really happening before us.[29]

Of course it is quite possible for someone, some critic, to (mis)read a work that *does* go beyond mere shock as not doing so, and to dismiss it. Early on some critics viewed David Cronenberg this way: mistakenly, I would argue, and with time the body of his films reveals a seriousness of purpose.[30] Takishi Miike’s *Imprint* (discussed at length in this issue by William Leung) would be another case. Or, it is possible for critics/fans to argue for the understanding of or value of a specific film in terms that almost no one else can recognize. We have to allow for demented and perverse readings without endorsing them as valid. Clearly this raises an important discussion which I will have to return to later in this essay involving exploitation, the representation of violence, boundaries, and censorship, as well as the nature of entertainment in a market economy.

The rise of a distinct market in the West for “Asian Extreme” horror cinema and the increased circulation and availability of world cinemas dramatizes the nature and problems of cross cultural (mis)understanding and analysis. Developing a richer discussion needs to address new films and new film cycles (as the *Jump Cut* sections on horror films have begun to do), pay attention to new methods and topics such as considering the senses and emotions in media analysis, work out more precisely the nature of disgust and abjection as concepts and projective audience identifications, delineate the situation of ethics and morality in relation to entertainment and exploitation in a market economy, and understand aesthetics of these controversial dramatic

narratives. That agenda will shape the next installment in this essay.

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### Notes

1. Several people gave me particularly acute responses to earlier drafts of this article: Dave Andrews, Dave Tolchinsky, Catherine Clepper, Julia Lesage, John Hess, Jocelyn Szczepaniak-Gillece.

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2. Links to JC TOC pages for 49, 50.

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/index.html>

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc50.2008/index.html>

3. “Serving the People: *Dumplings*,” *Jump Cut* no. 49 (April 2007).

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/Dumplings/index.html>

4. I don’t have a precise source for this quote, which I wrote down when I first heard it, so I’m sure it is accurate, but I’d appreciate any help in tracking down the reference.

5. Although of course this is not uniform. In the U.S., people in rural areas often see dogs as primarily work animals and value them as such; people in the inner city often view them as primarily watch dogs and automatically considered dangerous and threatening unless proven otherwise. Recent scandals around organized dog fighting and dog racing dramatize the norm that canines should not be treated cruelly. In most of the developing world, only the wealthiest have companion animals; rather than members of the household, dogs are considered functional with barely any sentiment attached to their injury or death.

6. Chuck Kleinhans, “Dog Eat Dog: Neo-imperialism in Kim Ki-duk’s *Address Unknown* (Suchwiin bulmyeong (2001),” *Visual Anthropology*. 22: 182-199, 2009.

7. [http://www.petatv.com/tvpopup/video.asp?video=trent\\_fur&Player=wm&speed=\\_med](http://www.petatv.com/tvpopup/video.asp?video=trent_fur&Player=wm&speed=_med)

8. Richard Spencer, “China hunting for online kitten killer,” *National Post* (Canada) March 4, 2006, p. A15. Later reports indicated the woman was found and turned out to be a distressed single mother who did it for the money. Apprehended, she expressed regret.



9. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/travel/article3552377.ece>

10. A dish that consists of codfish processed with lye and subsequently reconstituted.

11. Though I have tried eel (seemed creepy to my mind), whale (before they were declared endangered), snails (NYC French restaurant), horsemeat (in France and in Chicago), guinea pigs (in Peru in a peanut sauce), and rabbit (when I was in the Navy; it was offered for the sailors from the South while the ones from the North had lobster—each thinking the other choice was bizarre or gross).

British cinema professor Geoffrey Nowell-Smith once told me that early in his career he taught in a French boarding school which served rabbit once a week. The serving platter that went to the teacher's table was first given to the biology teacher who inspected the anatomy to ensure it was rabbit after an earlier cook was caught serving cats.

12. Evidenced in the book *Fear Factor: Yuck! Grossest Stunts Ever*, aimed at the 9-12 year old market. See also:

<http://www.kidzworld.com/article/4924-top-ten-grossest-fear-factor-stunts>

Of course academic food anthropologists study cuisine as an entry point to understanding specific cultures in larger terms, and are attentive to the social and historical context of food and food preparation and consumption customs. Entertainment shows seldom touch on these matters.

13. For a fuller discussion of Chan's work to date, see Wimal Dissanayake's essay, "The Class Imaginary in Fruit Chan's Films,"

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/FruitChan-class/index.html>

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14. I don't think it's impossible or undesirable to teach the film. Rather, I think that teaching it and dealing with abortion imagery requires an expenditure of extra class time and energy that I wasn't willing to make in this particular case. I discuss a similar problem in teaching graphic sexual images in my article: "Teaching Sexual Images: Some Pragmatics," *Jump Cut* no. 40 (March, 1996), pp. 119-122

<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC40folder/TeachPornPragmatics.html>

15. Those outside the U.S. might not be aware of this. The anti-abortion movement ranges from moderates who seek changes through traditional pressure group efforts such as electoral politics and chipping away at abortion rights through legislation, judicial decisions, and administrative practices to

right wing media pundits such as Bill O'Reilly who label medical personnel "baby killers" and dismiss women who seek abortions as only motivated by self interested convenience. The aggressive activists who publicly demonstrate and harass at women's clinics extend to fringe elements who have attacked and assassinated MDs. At the current moment, some abortion foes are denouncing the use of oral contraceptives as a form of abortion. As I was completing this article in Spring 2009, a Kansas doctor who performed abortions was shot to death in his church. The movement prefers to call itself "pro-life" rather than "anti-abortion." On the other side, the counter movement prefers to identify as "pro-choice" rather than "pro-abortion."

16. I have witnessed this at attempts to blockade women's clinics, in marching demonstrations against abortion, and at rallies. At certain moments in the past some anti-abortion groups purchased large billboard space to present such images as part of their campaigns; this seems to be dormant at present. One of the repeated and most memorable images is of a bloody "fetus" in a plastic bag attached to a long pole or placard. It is often claimed that this item was "found" in the waste trash behind a clinic. Given the item's size it seems much more likely that it is a medical/anatomical sample such as a dissection pig, or a dog or sheep fetus, or a doll. Of course the contrast between an official rhetoric of "honoring life" and the grotesque display of bloody dead flesh for shock purposes reveals a contradiction which might indicate a mental disorder among the people waving these items. Moderate elements of the anti-abortion movement try to distance themselves from these extremists and crazies.

17. The events are summarized in Robin Wilson, "Yale Student's Art Project Stirs Debate Over the Limits of Academic Freedom," *Chronicle of Higher Education daily news*, Monday April 21, 2008.  
<http://chronicle.com/daily/2008/04/2562n.htm>.

But the incident was also part of ongoing *Chronicle* newsblog coverage from April 17 to April 22. The blog comments section was especially intensive and gave evidence of the variety of possible responses. An update of the controversy: Robin Wilson, "Controversy Over Student's Art Exhibit at Yale Raises Issues of Academic Freedom," *Chronicle* May 2, 2008.  
<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v54/i34/34a01202.htm>

18. Abortion foes would argue that the fetus is a third person present; I do not believe a fetus is a person.

19. Abortion was illegal throughout the U.S. at that point except under certain conditions which threatened the mother's life in which case a medical operation might be possible. Restrictions on simple contraception were also severe. Connecticut, for example, outlawed even condoms, diaphragms, and spermicidal jelly. Many college student health clinics would not prescribe birth control pills or diaphragms for unmarried students. The wealthy and privileged could and did go abroad for medically supervised abortions.

20. The first two episodes were written and directed by Nancy Savoca, while the third was directed by Cher. It is perhaps the most bizarre wrenching of Cher's star image because the role of MD and outspoken abortion clinic administrator seems so at odds with the star's image as a singer and entertainer (with especially glossy and campy over-the-top music videos and Las Vegas stage concerts at this point in her career), pitchwoman for her brand named line of cosmetics in TV infomercials, and a previous dramatic career effectively playing working class women (e.g., *Silkwood*, 1983; *Mask*, 1985, *Mermaids*, 1990). The flawless surgically enhanced and cosmetically perfect face seems remarkably at odds with the role of socially conscious crusading feminist health professional.

21. Julian Stringer, "Category 3: Sex and Violence in Postmodern Hong Kong," in *Mythologies of Violence in Postmodern Media*, ed. Christopher Sharrett (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1999), 361-379.

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22. But he doesn't fully account for the general decline in Hong Kong theatrical gross in the colony and abroad due to factors such as the bursting of the 90s Asian economic bubble, the expansion of VCD and DVD sales and piracy, marketing barriers such Hong Kong films faced abroad in major markets such as Taiwan, the PRC, and Singapore, and local censorship barriers elsewhere. The Category 3 films do not cross over as easily as other Hong Kong genres such as comedies, pop musicals, martial arts, police action, etc.

23. For a forceful example, see Roger Ebert's review of Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible* which depicts a violent beating and what is commonly acknowledged as the most violent and relentless rape shown on film.

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20030314/REVIEWS/303140303/1023>

24. Tony Williams, "Hong Kong Social Horror: Tragedy and Farce in Category 3," in *Horror International*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams, (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2005), 203-219.

25. The film opens with a night time street-level panning shot, looking up, which identifies the neighborhood and presumably the place we are in after the cut as a small restaurant. Both Springer and Williams make a great deal of this as establishing the environment (incredibly, Williams compares it to Hitchcock), but it is really a very quick and conventional establishing shot; for a comparison to shots that really do establish the Hong Kong tenements and slums, see my analysis of *Dumplings*, or other Fruit Chan films such as *Hong Kong/Hollywood*, *Little Cheung*, etc.

26. John Carpenter's *Pro-Life* for the Showtime Masters of Horror season two depicts a young woman who goes to an abortion clinic seeking to terminate the life she carries. Her father and brothers show up, guns in hand, to stop the procedure, only to discover the birth is of a monster protected by its demon



father. [[return to page 5](#)]

27. by Bruce Gilley, April 12, 1995. Reproduced at:  
<http://www.chinasucks.org/fetal.htm>

28. “Eating Fetuses: The lurid Christian fantasy of godless Chinese eating ‘unborn children’.”  
[http://www.jesus21.com/poppydixon/sex/chinese\\_eating\\_fetuses.html](http://www.jesus21.com/poppydixon/sex/chinese_eating_fetuses.html).

See also: “Urban Legends and Folklore: Do They Eat Babies in China?”  
<http://urbanlegends.abought.com/library/weekly/aa080601a.htm>

29. The question of aesthetic distance and empathetic response will be addressed in detail in a later section of this essay.

30. Cronenberg has occasionally again become a focal point for controversy with *Crash* (1996) becoming a central argument about censorship in the UK.

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